

Transposition and Transformation, Controversy and Discovery. On the Christian Encounter with the Religions of Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century India, ed. by Karin Preisendanz and Johanna Buss, Wien: Sammlung de Nobili 2021, pp. 243 + XVII + 2.—Reviewed by Cezary Galewicz (Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland)

The volume of collected essays edited by Karin Preisendanz and Johanna Buss appears as No XXXVIII in the well-established Sammlung de Nobili Series and brings out a set of four detailed case studies focused on forms and modalities of religious “encounter” set in early colonial India. Indeed, the importance of “research of India’s past in the form of thorough, methodologically sound case studies” appears, to use the words of the editors, to be the call of the day. As it has ever been.

The initial inspiration for the publication of the volume was apparently an essay competition, on the topic of “Dimensions of the Christian Encounter with the Religion: Aims, Possibilities, Ramifications,” held in 2012–2013. The selection featured in the volume presents the four top winning essays (two of them penned by one author) that were subsequently revised by the authors prior to publication. In effect, though the reader receives a volume containing a seemingly limited number of contributing essays (only four in number), each of them is an example of a full-sized, intellectually rich, cutting edge research of an independent, standalone academic value. The selection is preceded by “Laudation” by Martin Gaensle, of the winner essay. This provides

an additional flavor to the whole project while highlighting an aspect primarily unmentioned either in the Introduction or in the contributions themselves: the notion of “civilizing mission” as a salient component of the missionary agenda. The carefully edited whole, supplemented by an introduction exhibiting its own intellectual ambitions, makes the volume a strong proposition for readers interested in matters beyond the “encounters” featured in the title. The volume proves to be exceptionally rich in biographies of remarkable personalities featured in all the four studies and introduces the reader to the little known, fascinating and far from complete missionary history, including the specific contribution of the Scottish makers of the British Empire. Moreover, for the convenience of the reader, the volume has been supplied by the editors with its own box of analytical tools for identifying problematics shared by all the four essays.

The first, opening essay of the volume, “Devotional Christianity and Pre-Indology in Early Eighteenth-Century Kerala: Johann Ernst Hanxleden, SJ., alias Arnos Padiri, Scholar and Poet,” is a detailed and painstakingly footnoted study penned by Christophe Vielle who draws our attention to the extraordinary figure, career and works of Johann Hanxleden. Better known in India as Arnos Padiri, Hanxleden was active in central Kerala at the close of the 18th c. and left a number of pioneering works of scholarly (among them dictionaries and grammars of Malayalam and Sanskrit), literary and devotional nature, some of them still in need of editing and study. The case study demonstrates how intricate the enquiry into the multilingual traces left by a personality as complex as that of Hanxleden can be and how answers to the many important questions still elude us. Our understanding of the lesser-known areas of history of the intellectual, religious and literary encounters between the Europeans and the Indians in South India is far from satisfactory.

The second contribution to the volume, authored by Mitch Numark and titled, “The Emergence of Resistant Judaism in Colonial Bombay: Christian Missionaries, Cochin Jews, and Hebraization of India’s Bene Israel Jews, 1738–1905,” has been based—to quote the author—

“on a twenty-five year examination of nineteenth-century Bene Israel-related primary sources in English and Marathi.” It focuses on the key events of the historical process of transformation that the Bene-Israel community went through while transforming itself into an Indian-Jewish community, largely as an effect of their encounter with the Protestant missionaries (especially the Scottish Presbyterians) and the Cochin Jews. In the words of the author, the essay is “the first study of the Bene Israel Jews to benefit from research in the archives of the Scottish Missionary Society...”, besides two other important and rich missionary archives located in Edinburgh. As argued at length by the author, this encounter which included prolonged instructions in the Hebrew language and Bible knowledge imparted, first, by the American Congregationist and later, the Anglican, mostly Scottish Presbyterian missionaries, did not result in converting Bene-Israel students into any form of Christianity. On the contrary, they showed themselves active and creative recipients of this education and emerged from the process as members of a new community that “strengthened and transformed their Judaism.” The author embraces and reinvigorates the concept of Hebraization used in earlier scholarship as an analytical tool for explaining the nature of the process of incorporating elements of the great tradition by the smaller ones, in parallel to the better-known example of Sanskritization.

As Vera Hoeke, author of the third essay, “‘... But Knows Not of His Need of the Atonement:’ Rammohun Roy’s Selective Construction of Christianity in His *Precepts of Jesus* and the Dispute about ‘True Christianity’ in Early Nineteenth-Century Calcutta,” observes, the “power of defining ‘true’ religion and of distinguishing it from ‘false traditions’ never was the monopoly of the colonizers” and subsuming parties to the encounter under the “invaders” and “invadees” does not explain anything, but rather “simplifies the matter and perpetuates colonial discourses in postcolonial theory.”

What perhaps could have enriched the essays presented in the volume, is a brief fleshing out of the socio-economic context of the modernizing cities such as the capitals of the three Presidencies

(later Provinces)—Bombay, Calcutta, Madras—especially in terms of the circumstances of the early regional print cultures and their novel ways of not only producing texts but also financing them. Such an approach might have helped to see how and where the new ideas could have and actually did circulate. In this matter, a wide perspective highlighting the huge change from the early decades of the nineteenth century onwards, especially around the mid and the second half of the century, with a focus on the fast-evolving mass printing of commercialised publications, could have shown to what extent did the early ways of distributing texts depend on other economic models of facilitating missionary activities in terms of using printed tracts, translations and grammars of vernacular languages. The American edition of Roy's *Precepts of Jesus* used by the author unfortunately slightly misrepresents by its very nature the actual working of the argument between Roy's ideas that had been published initially at the Calcutta Baptist Press and those of Marshman who had at his disposal the Serampore publishing machine. The reader has no chance to imagine how the dialog could have actually taken place and what could have been the "public sphere" for the exchange of ideas be made of at the time around 1820. Probably it was mostly limited to Calcutta and its English readership constituencies composed of the readers of English newspapers, early scholarly publishers, and the missionary publishing enterprises, including the better known Serampore Press and its far less known Calcutta competitors: the Baptist Press and, later on, the Unitarian Press with whom Rammohun Roy chose to associate himself at an early stage.

The essay concluding the volume, "The Scottish 'Discovery' of Jainism in Nineteenth-Century Bombay," authored by Mitch Numark, though set in a milieu somewhat overlapping that of the first essay of the collection, shows how versatile and rich not only in religious but also in cultural and intellectual impact were the missionary enterprises of the nineteenth century India and how ambitious and multi-faceted the missionary projects could be, even if manned by a mere few intrepid and exceptionally active Scottish missionaries. This case

study shows again several crucial aspects of the Scots role in the making of the British empire and proves convincingly how a deep understanding of the specific circumstances of “discovering” Jainism in the early nineteenth century Bombay could be an illustration of many other processes of discovery—made in the same period—that were of capital consequence for the future formation of research perspectives and methods for several disciplines devoted to studying Indian (and other) religions in the days to come. All the four long essays make the volume a must-read not only for the Indologists but also for the historians of the Christian missions and Christianity or those interested in the history of the makers of the British Indian Empire else the fascinating nineteenth century itself.